

Obedience, Integrity, and the Paradox of Selfhood

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IN HIS PRESIDENTIAL Address for the Association for Mormon Letters in 1979, Richard Cummings spoke of “a creeping identity crisis which is gnawing at the very heart of Mormondom.”¹ Using the example of his uncle B. F. Cummings’ failure to get Church help in publishing, or even selling, his fine book, *The Eternal Individual Self*, and the more well-known story of the removal and long exclusion of Joseph Smith’s “King Follett Discourse” from B. H. Roberts’ *History of the Church*, Cummings discussed what he called “the clash between institutional authority and individual integrity and between the imperative of blind obedience and the claims of reasoned belief.” With considerable forthrightness, Cummings spoke of a problem which is for many the most anguishing problem in Mormon experience—the struggle to maintain individual integrity, to be true to ourselves in the face of pressures to obey, to conform, to overlook what seem to Cummings and others to be “clear fallacies or even tyrannies in the strictly authoritarian pattern,” especially to keep faith with ourselves in the face of misunderstanding, hostility, even ostracism from our brothers and sisters and disapproval, even disciplinary action, from those in authority over us in the Church.

I believe that issue is indeed central to Mormon experience and literature but in ways that are, in my view, less troubling and at the same time more challenging than Cummings suggested. He saw the problem, at least in terms of our own *decisions*, as essentially a simple one, though the consequences might be difficult and complex: Clearly we are to choose individually reasoned belief over blind obedience, the honor of self over the demands of the group, or what Cummings at one point, referring to the examples of B. F. Cummings and B. H. Roberts, called “individual initiative on behalf of personal integrity in the face of hierarchical hostility or indifference.”² I sometimes wish the problem were that simple, with the enemies clearly identified and all lined up together and the main challenge being to attack or at least survive them. At other times I am grateful that, in fact, the issue is a genuine

paradox, a tragic but fruitful condition of existence, a source of the struggle but also of the supreme joy of growth in this universe in which “there must needs be opposition in all things.” In other words the tension between the conflicting values of individual integrity on the one hand and on the other obedience to a God we believe is acting through his servants, a tension which exists at all levels of the Church and from earliest times, is a tension that should not be resolved in favor of one or the other of those conflicting values. Rather, the Mormon identity crisis will, I hope, continue, successfully transcended, of course, by each of us in our own way but in ways which maintain both of those values of obedience and integrity as we work out our salvation in fear and trembling—and also as we try to write and appreciate Mormon literature.

Following are examples of some who have confronted this paradox and struggled to remain true to both of the conflicting values, with more or less heroic, sometimes tragic, results. The examples provide enduring images in the Mormon imagination, metaphors if you will, which may help us preserve the paradox as redemptive, rather than merely polarizing it in favor of one value or the other.

Cummings reminded us of the courageous integrity of B. H. Roberts in privately publishing and distributing the “King Follett Discourse” after it had been, without apology or even discussion, excluded by Church authority from his *History*; I will begin with a similarly courageous decision by Elder Roberts that may seem to have come down on the other side of the paradox but which actually, I believe, transcended it. In the early 1890s Elder Roberts, a member of the First Council of Seventy, and Apostle Moses Thatcher engaged in various political activities, even though they were counseled by the First Presidency not to. They were so counseled apparently because of concern about possible neglect of their Church duties. As Truman Madsen tells us in his biography of B. H. Roberts, at one time the conflict was reported in the press, and as a result the two outspoken political activists and the First Presidency asked forgiveness of each other and were reconciled.³ But when Elder Roberts was given Church encouragement in 1895 to serve as a delegate from Davis County to the Democratic state convention, he assumed he thus had permission to run for political office and accepted nomination as the Democrats’ candidate for Congress; he then was surprised and offended when, at the October General Conference, Elder Joseph F. Smith, a senior apostle and member of the First Presidency—and a Republican—publicly censured both him and Elder Thatcher, who was running for the U.S. Senate. The two Democrats saw the censure as politically motivated and stumped the state, openly decrying such “ecclesiastical interference.”⁴ Much partisan feeling developed, and when Roberts lost the election by 900 votes he was convinced (for the rest of his life) that the defeat was due solely to the criticism of himself and Elder Thatcher.

After the election members of the Twelve began to discuss whether Elder Roberts should be disciplined because of some of his public statements, but action was postponed until after statehood was conferred in January and then until Roberts finally agreed to meet with the First Presidency and the Twelve in February. Heber J. Grant reports that that meeting was the most painful of his life, as Elder Roberts was immovable in his position, feeling he had acted honestly and fairly and willing

to be removed rather than take anything back. A meeting in early March produced the same result, and Roberts was suspended from his office and from acting in the priesthood. At this meeting, Elder Grant records with great admiration, Roberts “held all the brethren at bay”⁵—responding to each of the Apostles in turn, speaking without notes but with perfect memory and composure, thinking brilliantly on his feet; but despite his admiration Elder Grant was appalled at Elder Roberts’ adamant position. He and Francis Lyman were appointed to call on Roberts, and after they had talked briefly with him at his home and were about to leave, Elder Grant noticed tears in Elder Roberts’ eyes and asked him to be seated again. Now there finally poured forth specific hurts, and the visitors were able to respond effectively.⁶ Apparently the key was that Roberts had previously refused to bring up, in his meetings with the Apostles, three separate situations where he had thought he had been intentionally maligned or slighted; as he now brought these forward, in each case Elder Grant had relevant personal knowledge that showed Roberts, to his satisfaction, that he had jumped to false conclusions. Elder Roberts, knowing Elder Grant’s perfect honesty, was “non-plussed. . . . This changes things,” he said.⁷ He promised to think the matter over again and write the two apostles in the morning, which he did, submitting to “the authority of God in the brethren” and confessing that, though he had acted all along in good conscience, after this struggle he felt much better and thanking them for their goodness. Not only Elder Roberts was changed by this experience. Elder Grant records in his journal of that day his great joy at receiving Elder Roberts’ letter and that he had learned much, especially about the importance of a private talk such as they had just had, as opposed to the earlier public arraignment before a council of the priesthood.

The story does not end there, however. Elder Roberts’ integrity still caused him to resist the so-called “political manifesto,” a prohibition against general authorities engaging in non-Church-related work, including political activity, without First Presidency approval. He and Elder Thatcher had previously refused to sign the document because they saw the danger that it could be used to discriminate against one party. Under a deadline at which Elder Roberts’ suspension was to become permanent, the First Presidency met with Elder Roberts late into the evening of March 25, after which he walked the streets all night, thinking and praying. He returned in the morning ready to sign, finding the First Presidency had also stayed all night, in tears and prayer. In Conference the next week, he confessed publicly that he had been wrong in his opposition. This action then estranged him permanently from political friends and backers, who subsequently avoided him. Elder Thatcher never signed the political manifesto, despite Elder Roberts’ long pleading with him, and he was removed from the Twelve and became estranged from the Church. Late in his life Elder Roberts described the paradox he had faced in the terms in which he saw it *after* he had successfully transcended it: “Will I give up my pride or will I be taken out of this glorious work?”⁸

Earlier in Church history there was a similar case of what I would call heroic though painful transcendence of the paradox. It is fairly easy now to know something of the differences, the apparent long-standing feud, between Brigham Young and Orson Pratt.⁹ Brigham respected Elder Pratt’s intelligence, literary power, and

vigorous faith, and he used him to excellent effect at such times as the public announcement and defense of polygamy in 1852. But by early 1860 President Young felt their differences were so serious as to require formal action; he called the Apostles together on January 27, 1860, “to consider the doctrines that Orson Pratt had advanced in his last Sermon,” and they decided Orson was wrong and all signed (except Orson) a unique bill of particulars.¹⁰ Elder Pratt called on the president the next day and “admitted he was excited; and for the future would omit such points of doctrine in his discourses that related to the Plurality of Gods, etc., but would confine himself to the first principles of the Gospel.”¹¹ President Young asked Orson why he was not as careful to observe the revelations given to preach in plainness and simplicity as to so strenuously observe the doctrines in other revelations. The following day, a Sunday, Orson acknowledged in a public sermon that there had been differences and he was yielding to the president. A few days later he again called at the president’s office and admitted “he had a self-willed determination in him.” According to the office journal, kept by President Young’s secretary:

The President said he had never differed with him, only on points of doctrine, and he never had any personal feelings, but he was anxious that correct doctrines should be taught for the benefit of the Church and the Nations of the earth. . . . President observed the brethren would have made it a matter of fellowship [but] he did not have it in his heart to disfellowship but merely to correct men in their views.

Prest. also remarked to Orson he had been willing to go on a Mission to any place at the drop of the Hat, and observed you might as well question my authority to send you on a Mission as to dispute my views in doctrine. Bro. Orson said he had never felt unwillingness in the discharge of his practical duties.¹²

President Young later that week directed the *Deseret News* to not print Orson’s sermon because he found it too evasive and defensive in its retractions. By April there was some cause—whether because of continuing uncertainty in the Saints, or in Orson, or both—again to call the leaders together “to consider the Doctrines of Orson Pratt as taught in the *Seer* and other works.” The Apostles concluded that Elder Pratt ought to retract in very specific terms—and to publish a sermon to that effect. As President Young expressed it, the earlier sermon of apology “represents me to the world as a tyrant trammelling them to believe as I do right or wrong; it is my calling . . . to see that right doctrines are taught.”¹³ Orson, a man of fierce integrity, said he believed Brother Brigham was called by God to preside but like other prophets and leaders could be in error on some points; according to the office journal,

[Elder Pratt] hardly felt he was competent to be an apostle and he left himself entirely in their hands, but he could not be hypocrite enough to retract his doctrines when he believed them, neither could he say he could receive doctrines that he could not believe; and if he was disfellowshipped he could not help it.

However, during twenty-four hours of the most painful confrontation between his deepest loyalties, Elder Pratt apparently decided that his truest integrity lay in his

commitment to the Lord's kingdom rather than to the speculations of his own philosophy. He came to a meeting of the Apostles the next night with a sermon of recantation prepared, to which President Young added a few remarks and accepted:

Brother Orson Pratt asked if the subject was to be dropped; or was it to be resuscitated again. President Young observed he never wanted the subject to be mouthed again, and wished those in the room, not to mention it, and asked O. Pratt if he ever wanted to open new ground to preach about, to submit such subjects to him first, remarking also that Bro. Orson was a sweet preacher, and he took great pleasure in hearing him, and had always admired his willingness to perform what labors had been required of him.¹⁴

Brother Brigham continued to admire Orson's preaching and chose him to represent the Church in answering the celebrated challenge of the Chaplain of the U.S. Congress, Dr. John P. Newman, to debate the biblical authority for polygamy in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1870—a debate Pratt carried with what Newman discovered to be astounding erudition and style. And just six months after that April 5, 1860, meeting, when it was reported to Brigham Young that Orson was still apparently being twitted by some for his public humiliation but bearing it well, a clerk reported, "The President remarked . . . if Bro. Orson was chopped up in inch pieces each piece would cry out Mormonism was true."¹⁵ But in a page of minutes from the April meeting, we get perhaps the best glimpse of President Young's feelings and understanding of the paradox, in his own words as taken down by the secretary:

This day I have seen the best spirit manifested. I have heard 15 or 16 men all running in the same stream. I was delighted. Tomorrow the Church will be 30 years old, about the age that Jesus was when he commenced his mission. We are improving and I just know it, my path is like the noon day sun, and I could cry out hallelujah Hallelujah Praise to God who has been merciful to us and conferred on us his Holy Spirit. . . . Bro. Orson I want you to do just as you have done in your Apostleship, but when you want to teach new doctrine, to write those ideas, and submit them to me, and if they are correct, I will tell you—there is not a man's sermons that I [more] like to read, when you understand your subject—but you are not perfect, neither am I.¹⁶

Once more, the story does not end that simply; after a while, Orson again published views on various matters that Brigham saw as undermining to his authority as Prophet and to the gospel tradition from Joseph Smith he felt responsible to preserve untainted, especially in the face of influential advocates like Orson Pratt. He was particularly concerned to keep the options open on matters such as the plurality of gods and God's progression in knowledge and power, and also about the natural processes affecting Adam's origin and status, rather than to let Orson Pratt's absolutism about God's perfection and his biblical literalism become standard by default. On August 23, 1865, the general authorities felt it necessary to publish in the *Deseret News* a summary of Orson Pratt's errors and their reasons for opposing them, along with a reprint of Elder Pratt's earlier recantation, and again Elder Pratt

followed up with a public confession and apology. But in the summer of 1868, he again found himself in opposition to President Young in discussions in the School of the Prophets about Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible, and this apparently broadened out to bring up the old doctrinal differences. Then a surprising thing happened; with no apparent coercion or pressure, and right after these discussions, on July 1 Orson Pratt wrote the following letter to President Young:

Since the last two meetings at the school, I have, at times, reflected much and very seriously, upon the feelings which I have suffered myself for years to occasionally entertain respecting certain doctrines ... now believed by the Church, and have tried to justify myself in taking an opposite view, on the supposition that I was supported by the letter of the word of God: but as often as I have yielded to this influence I have felt an indescribable wretchedness which fully convinces me that I am wrong; I wish to repent of these wrongs for I fully realize that my sins, in this respect, have been very great, and of long continuance, and that it has been only through your great forbearance and long suffering, and the patience of my quorum, that I have been continued in the high and responsible calling of the Apostleship to this day.

I am deeply sensible that I have greatly sinned against you, and against my brethren of the school, and against God, in foolishly trying to justify myself in advocating ideas, opposed to those which have been introduced by the highest authorities of the Church, and adopted by the Saints. I humbly ask you and the school to forgive me. Hereafter, through the grace of God assisting me, I am determined to be one with you, and never be found opposing anything that comes through the legitimate order of the Priesthood, knowing that it is perfectly right for me to humbly submit, in all matters of doctrine and principle, my judgment to those whose right it is, by divine appointment, to receive revelation and guide the Church.

There is no one thing in this world, or in that which is to come, which I do more earnestly desire, than to honor my calling, and be permitted to retain the same, and with my brethren the Twelve, enter the Celestial kingdom, with a full preparation to enjoy the glory thereof for ever

With feelings of great sorrow, and deep regret for all my past sins I subscribe myself your humble brother in Christ. Orson Pratt, Sen.¹⁷

Here we find none of the stubborn defensiveness and evasiveness of the earlier so-called recantations. The confession seems to come truly from Eider Pratt's deepest convictions. A few days later he spoke before the School of the Prophets, apologizing for "opposing doctrine revealed" and confessing that "whenever he had done so and excused himself because of what was written [by literally interpreting the scriptures] his mind became darkened and he felt bad."¹⁸ We find no further examples of his opposing Brigham on doctrine. Wilford Woodruff later maintained

that it was only President Young's "firmness" in resisting Orson Pratt's "unyielding stubbornness" in offering to resign the Apostleship rather than change his opinions that kept Elder Pratt in the Church.

My third example is not, as I believe the first two were, transcendent. It is more tragic than heroic, but it is thus a reminder of the truly tragic dimensions of the paradox of selfhood. Despite the meticulous work of Juanita Brooks concerning the Mountain Meadows massacre and the illuminating exploration of her contribution by Levi Peterson in his fine essay, "The Mormon Historian as Tragedian,"¹⁹ it is possible to go away from that work, as I suspect most do, with the impression that the only tragedy was that which occurred to the massacred men, women, and children—or perhaps to those who suffered the guilt of their horrifying deed. And we can distance ourselves, certain that we would never make such a mistake as those deluded fanatics did. I wish to explore briefly another tragedy, that of John D. Lee as he faced the paradox of integrity and obedience; I wish to honor his memory by insisting that he was not a mere deluded fanatic, that his was not a simple and simply wrong decision, and with the suggestion that, though I trust we could have done better, if it would have been a simple decision for us we have something to learn from him.

John D. Lee was a loyal and tried Saint, an intrepid builder of the Kingdom whose uninhibited diaries are an important part of our literary heritage. He was made a part of Brigham Young's own family through the sacred early Mormon ceremony of "adoption" by temple sealing and was a sincere priesthood holder who believed in keeping his covenants. After the massacre he continued for a while in positions of trust in southern Utah that could not have been possible without President Young's approval, but then the support was withdrawn. I believe that was because Brigham gradually became convinced that Lee had participated in violence—something Brigham intensely, almost irrationally, abhorred—and that Lee had lied about it, actions which threatened the Mormon community from within and without.

Brigham made his own tragic choice; he chose the welfare of the community over full candor and then over personal loyalty. Blame was increasingly focused on Lee by those who broke silence, and he was summarily excommunicated by the Church in 1870 and executed by civil authorities on the massacre site in 1877, twenty years after the event. He comported himself with remarkable, articulate dignity to the end, and near the end he wrote what he called a "confession," which was taken by a non-Mormon agent, altered in crucial ways Lee would not, I believe, have allowed, and then made the heart of an anti-Mormon sensation called *Mormonism Unveiled*. Despite the textual alterations it is possible, I think, to detect John D. Lee's authentic voice at important points. This is his description of his feelings upon entering the besieged encampment of emigrants he is about to betray to their deaths, they gathering about him in "wild consternation," some convinced "their happy deliverance had come," others looking on him "with doubt, distrust, and terror":

God knows my suffering was great I knew that I was acting a cruel part and doing a damnable deed. Yet my faith in the godliness of my leaders was such that it forced me to think that I was not suf-

ficiently spiritual to act the important part I was commanded to perform. My hesitation was only momentary. Then feeling that duty compelled obedience to orders, I laid aside my weakness and my humanity and became an instrument in the hands of my superiors and leaders.²⁰

The echoes of Eichmann are so strong they almost drown out the unintentionally ironic phrasing of the paradox we are discussing: Lee felt it was his “weakness and humanity”—his human compassion—that he must give up to be obedient. The struggle had not been easy or simple; after the council meeting a few days before, at which the final plans for the massacre had been made, Lee tells us,

I ... went away to myself, and bowed myself in prayer before God, and asked Him to overrule the decision of the Council. I shed many bitter tears, and my tortured soul was wrung nearly from the body by my great suffering. I will here say, calling upon Heaven, angels, and the spirits of just men to witness what I say, that if I could then have had a thousand worlds to command, I would have given them freely to save that company from death.²¹

Of course, when he wrote this he knew the irony that that “thousand worlds” was indeed what he and the others had given up by proceeding—that is, their exaltation in the eternal, progressive realms of God. But at that earlier time, all he received, in the midst of his anguish, was a visit from a friend he trusted who assured him that to go ahead was all right, “for the brethren in the Priesthood were all united in the thing, and it would not be well for me to oppose them.”

When he returned to the council, they prayed together in a circle for divine instruction. After the prayer Major Higbee, commander of the Iron County Militia said, according to Lee, “I have the evidence of God’s approval of our mission. It is God’s will that we carry out our instructions to the letter.” But for Lee this particular evil spirit would not come out with fasting and prayer. There had been preliminary discussions, a few days earlier, about possible action against the emigrants, after which Lee claims he found universal willingness among the Mormons, enraged over the real and rumored boasts and threats and actions of the emigrants, to launch an attack. Lee reported, in what is for me the most painful moment of his personal tragedy:

I spent one of the most miserable nights there that I ever in the history of my faith passed in my life. I spent much of the night in tears and at prayer. I wrestled with God for wisdom to guide me. I asked for some sign, some evidence that would satisfy me that my mission was of Heaven, but I got no satisfaction from my God.²²

It seems that not only *after* the massacre did the heavens turn to brass for the Iron County Militia, as Levi Peterson notes in his essay, but the heavens did so as soon as murder conceived in the men’s hearts.

Nevertheless, it will just not do to dismiss John D. Lee as a religious fanatic, victimized by the conditioning of his Mormon faith toward blind obedience. To do so is to demean the genuine paradox, the tragic complexity, of his situation; it is to come down too easily on the side of integrity to self, of inner conviction of moral

right, over obedience to those one firmly believes—*also* on the basis of inner conviction—are his leaders on the path of salvation; it is to enthrone preservation of life as the ultimate value and thus bring into question all revealed religion and all civilized values that call for individual conformity and sacrifice.

Just as John D. Lee is an apparent example of a clearly wrong choice for blind obedience, but one which, I believe, on examination turns out to be somewhat more complex, so Levi Savage, of the Willie handcart tragedy of 1856, is an apparent example of a clearly *right* choice for individual integrity, but one which, I believe, is also somewhat more complex. Elder Savage was captain of the second hundred, one of only four among that company of 400 emigrants who had been west before, and the only one of them all who raised his voice in opposition at the meeting in Florence, Nebraska, in August when the company considered whether or not to go on to Utah that late. According to the narrative of John Chislett, who was in the company and left the Church after barely surviving the ordeal and before writing his account, the other leaders, including G. D. Grant and William Kimball, Church agents at Florence, favored their going on. They prophesied in the name of God the company would get through in safety, even that the weather would be arranged for their good.

But Levi Savage used his common sense and his knowledge of the country. He declared positively that to his certain knowledge we could not cross the mountains with a mixed company of aged people, women, and little children, so late in the season without much suffering, sickness, and death,... but he was rebuked by the other elders for want of faith, one elder even declaring that he would guarantee to eat all the snow that fell on us between Florence and Salt Lake City.²³

Brother Savage's counsel was ignored and, indeed, a few weeks later, when the apostle, Franklin Richards, who had optimistically advocated the handcart plan in England, passed them on his way to Salt Lake, he stopped for a night and, being advised of Brother Savage's earlier opposition, "rebuked him very severely in open meeting for his lack of faith in God." According to Chislett, Elder Richards gave us plenty of counsel to be faithful, prayerful, obedient to our leaders, etc., and wound up by prophesying in the name of Israel's God that "though it might storm on our right and on our left, the Lord would keep open our way before us and we should get to Zion in safety."²⁴

More than fifty (one in eight) of the Willie Company died in the storms that overtook them in Wyoming, over 150 (one in four) of the Martin Company that was two weeks behind them. Chislett points up the painful irony that, according to all the old settlers in Utah, "the fall storms of 1856 were earlier and more severe than were ever known before or since. Instead of the Mormons' prophecies being fulfilled and their prayers answered, it would almost seem that the elements were unusually severe that season, as a rebuke to their presumption."²⁵

According to Chislett, "It was the stout hearts and strong hands of the noble fellows who came to our relief, the good teams, the flour, beef, potatoes, the warm

clothing and bedding, and not prayers nor prophecies, that saved us from death.” He, of course, had forgotten that it was prayers and prophecies that had saved these English millworkers from Europe, from Babylon, and would make them into Saints, despite the costs, that it was the love and conviction built on prayers and prophecies that moved those he called “noble fellows” to risk their lives in the rescue, including G. D. Grant and William Kimball. These two, who in their zeal had been partially responsible for the plight of the handcart pioneers, had traveled to Salt Lake with Elder Richards, Chislett notes, and immediately, at Brigham Young’s direction, turned around to come to their aid: “May God ever bless them for their generous, unselfish kindness and their manly fortitude How nobly, how faithfully, how bravely they wanted to bring us safely to the Valley—to the Zion of our hopes.”²⁶ Indeed, William Kimball, who spent an entire day carrying women and children through floating ice on a crossing of the Sweetwater, according to the journal of one of the survivors, “staid so long in the water that he had to be taken out and packed to camp and he was a long time before he recovered as he was chil[le]d through and in after life he was always afflicted with rheumatism.”²⁷

These originally overzealous and now bravely self sacrificial rescuers, I believe, understood the paradox of integrity and obedience better than the apostate Chislett did, and Brigham Young understood it better than Chislett or Elder Richards: He severely and publicly chastised the apostle for not having had the common sense to stop the rear companies in Florence and for encouraging the emigrants to rely on miraculous intervention to protect them from needless folly in a practical decision that could be made rationally—something Brother Brigham would never do.²⁸ And Brigham Young, better than Chislett, understood that other paradox, of faith and works: When he was informed that some of the Martin company were arriving on Sunday, November 30, he dismissed the day’s meetings and sent the Saints home to prepare to feed and nurse the survivors rather than stay there and pray. “Prayer is good,” he said, “but when baked potatoes and milk are needed, prayer will not supply their place.”²⁹ But perhaps Levi Savage understood better than any of them the paradox of integrity and obedience. According to Chislett’s narrative, after Savage was defeated in his lone opposition at the Florence meeting, he said to his fellow Saints:

Brethren and sisters, what I have said I know to be true; but, seeing you are to go forward, I will go with you, will help you all I can, will work with you, will rest with you, will suffer with you, and if necessary, I will die with you. May God in His mercy bless and preserve us. Amen.

[Chislett continues] Brother Savage was true to his word; no man worked harder than he to alleviate the suffering which he had foreseen, when he had to endure it.³⁰

These images I have recalled of the perennial struggle between obedience and integrity, together with those of Abraham and Isaac, of Heber Kimball and Vilate,³¹ must remain before us, not forgotten or rationalized away. They are images that, if they had been remembered and imaginatively perceived, may have helped us deal better than we did with the modern Abrahamic test for Mormons, the denial of priest-

hood to the blacks. In that test God, through his servants, asked us not only to sacrifice our political and social ideals and the understanding and the good will of our colleagues and friends, but he seemed to ask us to sacrifice the very essence of his own teachings to us. It appeared necessary to deny our understanding of the divine potential, based in an eternal existence coequal with God and each other, of all God's children, and the higher ethical vision of possible exaltation for all people through progression after death, concepts that are among the most attractive and vital features of our Mormon faith.

Those who failed the test, I believe, are those who thoughtlessly obeyed, even rationalizing the mystery away by finding some way to blame the *blacks* because of their supposed lineage or pre-existent mistakes. On the other hand, those also failed who emotionally opted for their own personal vision, rejected the authority of the Church and loyalty to their community, and blamed Brigham Young or the current prophet or other supposedly racist Mormons, never themselves. My personal hero from that time is President Hugh B. Brown, who wrote the First Presidency message of 1969 that urged all Mormons to pray, and thus prepare, "that all of the blessings of the Gospel ... become available to men of faith everywhere,"³² which could only mean when blacks would be given the priesthood. Neither of the groups I mentioned that failed the test—whether conservatives or liberals—took that suggestion seriously, and thus they did not find a resolution to the paradox of obedience and integrity through their personal preparation nor did they help God prepare us to live the higher law of priesthood for all.

If, in our consideration of these examples of a central paradox from our heritage, we suppose there were simple solutions, if we imagine that we could have chosen easily and more wisely, I think we dishonor the great men and women who took part in these dramas and the full anguish with which they touched, and we must touch, the tragic heart of human experience. And, if we thus suppose there are easy solutions to the dilemma of personal integrity and social responsibility, we diminish drastically the potentiality of Mormon literature, and, I think, ultimately endanger our own salvation.

Much of the greatest literature in our western tradition has derived its power from retaining the tension in this tragic paradox of individual and group values. Let me mention Antigone, whose admirable and absolute loyalty—even unto death—to her own conscience, over against the absolute demands of the state in the form of the equally unyielding Creon, led to immense tragedy. Or Cordelia, who insisted on integrity in the face of her father's need for public, ceremonial obedience and pursued that integrity to a disastrous, though ultimately redemptive, extreme. Or Billy Budd, at whose "unjust" execution we stand appalled, especially when it seems carried out by officers and crew who are impelled by some mysterious force, though none of them wants it to happen. Yet in the end, we are able to affirm that force though we recognize its cost; we stand with Captain Vere on the tragic rack of the paradox of individual integrity versus obedience to absolutely necessary civilized forms and admit that "we all wear the buttons of the King."

And, of course, there are cautionary tales. Thoreau, who maintained the paradox in *Walden* by using symbolic images of growth that transcended mere individualism,

turned toward one-sided polemic, however powerful, in *Civil Disobedience*, a one-sidedness which grew until it emerged in his own life as such blind allegiance to John Brown that he could impressively defend him with the notion that the end justifies the means. Brown, you remember, was the abolitionist who, at Harpers Ferry, killed not only slaveholders but their children, with a rationale that especially chills Mormons because they remember that exact phrase issuing from lips of the child-murderers at the Haun's Mill massacre: "Nits make lice." Those who, like Thoreau or Brown, would exalt the isolated individual conscience into an absolute and also those who, like Creon or our Mormon ancestor Major Higbee, would exalt obedience to society's judgment into an absolute, all need to learn to honor Oliver Cromwell's famous plea, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, consider that you may be wrong."

Our own Mormon literature, it seems to me, has achieved its greatest heights when it has been able to preserve and transcend the paradox, rather than needing to oversimplify it into a battle and to choose a side. Our first generation writers (1830–1880) usually tended to exalt obedience and group values, but their best work comes when they intuitively assert their individualism in tension against or beyond those values—as in Parley P. Pratt's *Autobiography* or Eliza R. Snow's "Trail Diary." Our "second generation writers" (about 1930–1960) tended to exalt individualism against the values of what they saw as a declining culture and a deficient religion, but in their best work, such as Virginia Sorensen's *The Evening and the Morning* and Maurine Whipple's *The Giant Joshua*, they intuitively create the power of those traditional group values and covenants as a judgment on the excesses of individualism. In our own generation our best writers, in their best work, struggle with the same paradox, with no simple compromises or side-choosing: Clinton Larson's "Homestead in Idaho" and "Advent," Douglas Thayer's "Under the Cottonwoods" and "The Redtail Hawk," Eileen Kump's "The Willows" and "Sayso or Sense," Don Marshall's "A Sound of Drums" and "Fugues and Improvisations," Dian Saderup's story published in 1979 in *Sunstone*, which captures the painful paradox and its transcendence, without irony I believe, even in her title, "A Blessing of Duty."

Here I have tried to highlight the seriousness and centrality of the paradox of obedience and integrity in the search for selfhood. There is certainly a constant danger that individual integrity faces in any kind of powerful group—whether family, church, political party, or academic community. I worry about the tendency to *simplify* that danger, which is, I think, profoundly paradoxical, into a mere dichotomy. But perhaps one image of dichotomy that Richard Cummings used in his challenging address provides us, somewhat ironically, with a way toward genuine resolution. He described what he called "the theological and ecclesiastical dichotomy which has produced the identity crisis" in terms of a polarity, we should all recognize, that is, those who lose themselves in the Church and those who seek to find themselves there. The former are those who "refer their problems and worries to the 'sure voice of authority,'" who renounce "their autonomous identity through blind obedience and mindless activism," and the latter are those who "think for ourselves in working out our own individual salvation as we each separately see fit and according to our own lights."³³ Notice the pronouns: *they* and *we*. Cummings,

as I think we all would do given only those alternatives, clearly identifies with those who seek to *find* themselves in the Church and thus “reach their own thoughtful conclusions, however painful, and forge their individual testimonies in the crucible of private doubt and personal despair.” But difficult and painful as that seems, it is still, I think, too easy, too simple. Perhaps it would be well for any of us who would seek to find ourselves rather than lose ourselves in the Church to remember Christ’s ultimate statement of the paradox: He who would find his life, who *seeks* it, shall lose it, but he who will lose it shall find it. We all are startled a bit by the mystery in that, but I think we can respond to the imaginative and imaginable resolution there of the dilemma of the individual and the group—one that will prevent us from being gored on either horn of the dilemma.

But what is that resolution—in literal terms? Can we be less mystical? William Blake, considered by many a true mystic, nevertheless gave us a powerful articulation as well as moving imaginative representations of that resolution. He taught that “without contraries is no progression” and warned that “whoever tries to reconcile [the contraries] seeks to destroy existence”³⁴—an interesting parallel to the Mormon idea that without opposition there is no existence and to Joseph Smith’s intriguing notion that “by proving contraries truth is made manifest.”³⁵ Blake rejected either compromise or choice as a solution—both poles have values which must be preserved. Blake used the image of marriage to convey his sense of a redemptive *fusion* of the various sets of conflicting values as opposed to compromise—or suppression or victory of one or the other poles. In the true marriage, neither individual is destroyed, but their individual loneliness and limitation is transcended in their mutual creative acts and the fruit they bear—which they could not bear alone. This image of marriage is for Blake mainly an imaginative resolution, but there is a literal one, I believe, in *literal* marriage and in what we can learn from one of its essential features.

The general resolution of the paradox of individual and group, of integrity to conscience and obedience to law or commandment, is, I believe, found in covenants, of which eternal marriage is one form. A covenant is not, contrary to popular cliché, merely a *contract* between individuals, or between God and the individual, with mutual benefits. It is, in the words of the fine Bible scholar, George Mendenhall, “[a] free, voluntary acceptance of ethical obligation on the basis of and as response to past experience.”³⁶ A covenant is a free, conscientious binding of the individual will to God, to an eternal partner, to a community and its land and history and sacred texts. It is not made blindly but out of gratitude and hope based on real experience. It turns neither the individual will nor the community into an idol that holds ultimate authority but reserves that ultimate authority to God, who is known and served both through the self and the community. One remains perfectly free to break the covenant but is bound in conscience to the reality, of his experience with the divine, both as an individual and through the experiences made possible to him only in the community. And paradoxically, this *binding* brings greater *freedom* than does individual autonomy. This is how Michael Novak, speaking specifically of the bonds of marriage, describes the paradox and its transcendence:

Marriage is an assault upon the lonely, atomic ego. Marriage is a

threat to the solitary individual. Marriage does impose grueling, bumbling, baffling, and frustrating responsibilities. Yet if one supposes that precisely such things are the preconditions for all true liberation, marriage is not the enemy of moral development in adults. Quite the opposite³⁷

Being married and having children has impressed on my mind certain lessons, for whose learning I cannot help being grateful. Most are lessons of difficulty and duress. Most of what I am forced to learn about myself is not pleasant....

Seeing myself through the unblinking eyes of an intimate, intelligent other, an honest spouse, is humiliating beyond anticipation. Maintaining a familial steadiness whatever the state of my own emotions is a standard by which I stand daily condemned. A rational man, acting as I act?...

My dignity as a human being depends perhaps more on what sort of husband and parent I am, than on any professional work I am called upon to do. My bonds to them hold me back (and my wife even more) from many sorts of opportunities. And yet these do not feel like bonds. They are, I know, my liberation. They force me to be a different sort of human being, in a way in which I want and need to be forced.³⁸

As Martin Luther put it, "Marriage is the school of love." I would add that, for many of the same reasons which Novak articulates, that is, those liberating confrontations with self and others which a covenant demands, the Church also is the school of love.

To end where we began, this is how B. F. Cummings, in his fine book on the individual, which he had to publish himself, describes the paradox and its transcendence: "The self is insubordinate, wandering, imperially aloof, solitary, lonely, withdrawn, unvisited, impenetrable"; it "cannot escape from existence nor can it escape from the awareness of its existence" nor from the "inevitable sense of solitude" that is "born of the very fact of individuality," of "being an eternally identical one."³⁹ But Cummings continues elsewhere:

The Mormon view of an individual's progress through the eternities is first of all dependent upon his exercise of his free agency in conforming to all the conditions. We must not lose sight of the fact that ultimately exaltation rests in his hands and depends upon his decisions and actions. One of the conditions of his own progress is his affiliation with others whose goal is the same as his own. Nothing that he can do is of avail to him without these affiliations. Through all eternity he remains an individual but through eternity he will remain a social individual. His aim, then, becomes one of affiliation in the highest social circles for which he can qualify. This aspect of the doctrine could well be called affiliationism. It marks the fact of individuality and also that of association. These very affiliations aug-

ment the individual's stature as an individual. The whole concept of progress becomes one of associative progress, but this doctrine of affiliation opens up the way for each individual to develop to the fullest his individual powers⁴⁰

I would suggest that the Association for Mormon Letters can fulfill the high hope Richard Cummings, as its president, articulated for it, that is, to provide "a partial but salutary resolution" of the Mormon identity crisis; but it can do that only if its members perceive that crisis not as a battle but as a paradox, a potentially fruitful one for Mormon life and Mormon letters. The Association can indeed, and *does* I think, provide what Richard called "an appropriate setting in which to maintain one's integrity as an individual in a Mormon context."⁴¹ I would suggest that it will achieve its full potential only if it can find ways not only to "serve the Church's best interests," as Richard suggested it does, by helping individual members maintain, explore, and express their individuality but also by imaginatively challenging and helping them to endure in the struggle required to find their true selves in relationships, in the challenge of covenant-making, in the true marriage of the contraries of obedience and integrity.

NOTES

1. Richard J. Cummings, "Some Reflections on the Mormon Identity Crisis," Presidential Address to the Association for Mormon Letters, given 13 October 1979, printed in *Sunstone* 4 (December 1979). The quotation is from page 27.
2. Cummings, p. 29.
3. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1980), pp. 221–229.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
9. See the discussion in Eugene England, *Brother Brigham* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1980), p. 87, and the extended analysis in Gary James Bergera. "The Orson Pratt-Brigham Young Controversy," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 13 (Summer 1980): 7–49.
10. Minutes, 27 January 1860, MS, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.
11. Secretary's Journal, 28 January 1860. LDS Church Archives.
12. *Ibid.*, 31 January, 1860.
13. *Ibid.*, 4 April 1860.
14. *Ibid.*, 5 April 1860.
15. *Ibid.*, 1 October 1860.
16. Miscellaneous Papers, 5 April 1860, MS, Brigham Young Papers, LDS Church Archives.
17. Letter Book of Brigham Young, 1867–68, pp. 920–921, LDS Church Archives.
18. Church Historical Office Journal, 4 July 1868. LDS Church Archives.
19. Juanita Brooks, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1950), and *John Doyle Lee: Zealot-Pioneer Builder-Scapegoat* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co, 1963 and [corrected new edition] 1972); Levi Peterson, "Juanita Brooks: The Mormon Historian as Tragedian," *Journal of Mormon History* 3 (1976): 47–54.
20. John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled* (St. Louis: Bryan Brand and Co., 1878), pp. 239–240.
21. *Ibid.*, p.234

22. Ibid., p 228.
23. The Chislett narrative is quoted in Thomas B. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton, 1873), p. 317.
24. Chislett, p. 319
25. Chislett, p. 332.
26. Chislett, p. 326.
27. The Journal of Patience Loader Archer, typescript of original, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, p. 87.
28. See President Young's Sermon, 2 November 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1854–86), 4:69.
29. Sermon printed in *Deseret News*, 10 December 1856.
30. Chislett, p. 317.
31. Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 95. See my discussion of this modern version of the Abraham-Isaac story in "Joseph Smith and the Tragic Quest," reprinted in *Dialogues with Myself: Personal Essays on Mormon Experience* (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1984), 1–18.
32. Issued December 15, 1969, and published in *Church News*, January 10, 1970, p. 12, and in *Dialogue* 4 (Winter 1969): 102–103.
33. Richard Cummings, p. 29.
34. Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors Edition*, Abrams, et al., eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 1323.
35. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, B. H. Roberts, ed., 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1951), 6:428.
36. George E. Mendenhall, in "Covenant," an article in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1979), 5:230.
37. Michael Novak, "The Family Out of Favor," *Harper's* 252 (April 1976): 39.
38. Novak, p. 42.
39. B. F. Cummings, *The Eternal Individual Self* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing Co., 1968), pp. 7, 69, 70.
40. B. F. Cummings, p. 121.
41. Richard Cummings, p. 32.

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